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State-Tribal Relations Committee 64th Montana Legislature

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March 24, 2016

Richard Oppen, Director
Department of Public Health and Human Services
PO Box 4210
Helena, MT 59604-4210

Dear Director Oppen:

I write on behalf of the State-Tribal Relations Committee to strongly encourage you to reconsider the department's plan to hire a contractor with \$100,000 of the \$250,000 appropriated by the 2015 Legislature for Indian youth suicide prevention grants. We understand the contractor would be directed to form a coalition to develop a strategic plan. However, the STRC believes this money is better spent providing direct grants to tribes and other entities to support suicide prevention programs at the local level.

The STRC respects and appreciates the extensive effort that DPHHS made to consult with and get input from tribes and urban Indian stakeholders on how the funding should be used. While consensus was not found, the STRC heard loudly and repeatedly that direct grants are the preferred choice.

We recognize the monumental challenge of suicide prevention. There is no key. It will take a multi-faceted approach like the grassroots programs designed by tribes and other entities to respond to the specific needs of their Indian communities. Therefore, the STRC believes this funding is best spent in support of those programs, especially those with a holistic, culturally- and/or spiritually-based approach.

With the decline in oil and gas revenues, the state budget is expected to be tight in the 2017 Legislature. It is easy to imagine additional funding will not be available.

Director, please don't lose this opportunity to most effectively and efficiently use the 2015 funding. We urge you to reconsider the department's proposed direction and focus on direct grants. We ask the department to collect data on and measure the success of programs that receive grants in order to report their progress to the 2017 Legislature.

Respectfully,

Senator Jonathan Windy Boy, Chairman

cc: Governor Bullock